

GRASS  
By Jon Kolb

M-4

"A child said, What is the grass?"

"And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves."

Walt Whitman

My Dad loved his grass. Not quite like Whitman, of course, but I think Dad's pleasure in the verdant carpets in front of and behind our house was due in part to an artistic instinct and, maybe, also represented order and decorum of a sort. Whatever it meant, Dad spent Summer evenings weeding and watering our plot of ground. Who knows what use this space was once put to? An orchard, a pasture, a cabbage patch to feed sauerkraut factories for the Germans of Milwaukee? Or, as Whitman said, a cemetery? We Americans have faint interest in the history of our soil and our family of four was certainly unaware of what ghosts had trod and tended the small yard where we built our lives.

The front lawn of our house was Dad's window to the neighborhood. Returning home from the office, he would change into casual clothes and inspect and refresh the grass with a weeder or hose. Back then, our elm-lined residential block had little car traffic, so in the evening neighbors would gather mid-street to discuss the day's events. Adult conversations about sports, family or, in mostly careful, measured tones, politics, were typical. The grown-ups owned the street, though the cries of children playing hide and seek sometimes also filled the evening air. Dad was a sociable person who would move up and down the block to engage with neighbors. In later years, one neighbor called Dad "the mayor of Frederick Avenue."

The lawn was a place for life's lessons. As soon as my brother and I could push the mechanical lawnmower, we were expected to do the weekly mowing. It was up to us to recognize when the job needed to be done, but we could expect to be reminded if the lawn was looking ragged. It wasn't enough to just do the job. Dad would walk us around the mowed lawn to point out any patches we had

missed. These corrections were made without rancor and with little blame. But they were insistent and may have implanted resilience, though perhaps not a streak of courage or willingness to rebel. Who can say? Anyway, there were two basic lessons to be learned. One: a job has to be done correctly, not just done. Two: Dad knew what he knew and had no trouble insisting his sons follow his lead.

As a believer in his lawn, Dad was an enemy of trees. Tree roots stole nutrients, tree canopies blocked out the sun. When we moved into our house, our small lot was ringed by a dozen trees. One by one, Dad had them taken down. An exception was made for a large chestnut tree in the backyard. My brother and I climbed that tree and used the nuts to carve finger rings, to hit with a baseball bat, and as currency for games we invented. The chestnut tree was only brought down after my brother and I had left home for college, perhaps signifying a new chapter in all our lives.

My Mother was not an enemy of the grass. In the Summer, she would sit down on the back lawn to hunt and harvest supposedly lucky four-leaf clovers. She would bring the clover into the house with some fanfare and then sustain them floating in a water glass or pressed between the pages of a book. What unrealized dreams did she think these talismans might bring to life? What hopes did they represent? I'll never know. One year, sitting on the lawn, Mom saw that two small evergreens on the side of the back yard had begun to brown at the edges. Dad circled them, but Mom stepped into that breach. She was determined to save those trees. In the morning, she watered the tree roots and again in the evening she placed a hose at their base. Day after day and night after summer night, the evergreens were nurtured. This was a quiet, unproclaimed war. In time, the trees lived. Mom had won that test of wills.

After my brother and I left home, Dad became too frail to handle the noisy power mower he now owned. He asked around the neighborhood and found a young man who had emigrated to the States from Nigeria. The young man was slowly learning the ways of his new country and I think Dad may have seen him as a late in life surrogate son in need of counsel. Once a week, the young man would report for lawn duty and would crisscross the same front and back lawns

that had once belonged to my brother and me. Did Dad give instructions to his new mower? Did he walk him around the yard to make points about how to do a job? Did this young man have the sense to understand what he was being taught? I don't know, although of course I myself do know there is a right way and a wrong way to do everything.

Years after my parents were gone and the house had been sold, I pulled over to the curb outside of our home and saw a lawn now surrendered to a parched, dense cover of weeds. Dad may be turning over. He should. Who are these people on our land, the place of our lives, and what do they know?

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